

Reshaping a Highly-Emotional, Long-Standing Conflict

Sask Power & Sandy Bay Community

“I want for us to work together on improving our working relationship now and into the future. We are committed to getting this right. We have hired Dialogue Partners to help us take a different approach this time. An approach, which we must acknowledge, we have never tried before. This new approach is as unfamiliar and uncertain to us, as it may seem for you. However, we are willing to try things a different way this time, and we are looking to Dialogue Partners to help guide us – the people of Sandy Bay and SaskPower – together in forging a better relationship.”

*- Robert Watson, CEO,
SaskPower*

This is a story about transforming conflict and building a better relationship between an Aboriginal Community and a provincial crown corporation. Dialogue Partners partnered with SaskPower and the people of Sandy Bay, a remote Northern community in Saskatchewan, to transform a highly emotional, long-standing conflict between these two parties. Through our work, we were able to build an improved, mutually beneficial relationship designed support everyone in moving forward together. Our role at Dialogue Partners was to build a relationship bridge between two neighbours. It really was time for change, or “Ayaniskach Meskocipayiwin” as the community in Sandy Bay calls it.

What happened?

A long-standing conflict dates back to 1930, when with a dam and hydro station was built on Aboriginal land. When SaskPower purchased it in 1981, they unknowingly inherited the history and impacts on the community that came with it. A key part of northern development and mining and northern power generation, the Island Falls hydro generating station is critical to the long-term growth of the province and the country.

Over time, a seemingly intractable conflict emerged between the two neighbours, defined by negative and hostile interactions. Past activities were based on standard approaches to negotiation and representative-based discussions with those in positions of power. These attempts at compensation-based agreements were not acceptable to all community members.

The objective of this project was to find a way to move forward TOGETHER that would re-shape the conflict in a sustainable and acceptable way for SaskPower and the aboriginal community members.

“If both of us work together we do great things.”

- Sandy Bay Resident

“SaskPower’s eyes are only looking from 1980 to today. But this situation is more than that. It’s from the beginning.”

- Island Falls Staff Member

“I want to see my grandkids grow up with trust instead of mistrust, like me”

- Sandy Bay Resident

Dialogue Partners’ approach focused on acknowledging the past and understanding the present in order to identify opportunities for the future. We facilitated and held space for the community and the organization to discuss uncomfortable, and sometimes painful and emotional issues. This was no easy task requiring 35 days on the ground in the Northern Village of Sandy Bay, talking with over 500 people in a community of 1,200. It meant many days and conversations with over 70 SaskPower staff throughout the organization along with interviews, workshops and training. Dialogue Partners hosted interviews, story-telling workshops and community meals as well trained youth to conduct their own video interviews in an effort to break the negative cycle and create a new path forward for building a sustainable relationship.

Things we learned along the way.

Where you’ve been is as important as where are going. Before you can look into the future you need to spend time in the past and present, detailing the emotion and state of the situation. People’s experiences and understanding are built on the fullness of their entire lives – not just the issue or topic you want to talk to them about. Chronic conflict defines people’s identity and perspective and it becomes how they view their world and interact with others. Time spent capturing the collective community understanding of the past was a necessary part of the healing, recognition and acknowledgement that would allow forward movement.

Go beyond those seeking to gain or affirm power. Deep and enduring divisions within the community emerged over the years as people tried to take control and make change happen on their own. Each goes about it in a different way, and not always in ways agreed by all in the community. We had to hold true to our value of inclusion and respect for each individual perspective and the diversity of the views that might create the way forward. The power of the future is held in the different views held by all who care about this issue, so that the future looks possible to each of them.

Jumping to solutions is not the answer. It’s hard not to be immediately responsive and jump to the end, but “band-aid” or simple solutions aren’t the answer to a complex situation. This project had a diversity of needs and ideas of what a successful

relationship would look like and there was no one single solution for the path forward. Instead the situation demanded a holistic approach that goes beyond one-time or ad-hoc initiatives, and empowers both the community and the organization with joint responsibility to sustain a successful relationship.

Words alone do not cut it. This was a transformational journey, not one of simple change. Dialogue Partners was tasked to build a unique plan of engagement and similarly a distinctive style of reporting. The only way to fully understand this community and this relationship is to experience it... the feeling, the emotion, the stories of the conflict, the culture and the people. So feel it for yourself by reading our report:

<http://northernvillagesandybay.ca/final-report/>.

What are the results and outcomes when you put the relationship first? Taking the time to understand issues and concerns, to build trust and relationships is the key to sustainable outcomes that benefit everyone. If you rush to solutions, or focus on a project versus the connection between neighbours, you risk short term gain for long-term challenges and heartache. Social license to operate can be defined as both the acceptance and the approval granted by a community or network of stakeholders to an organization for a project, or ongoing operations. True social license inspires trust and co-ownership. In essence, good neighbor status emerges, and this status is complex, grounded in organizational commitment and credibility and the community's social capital and hopes for the future. Social license can be built, but it must also be maintained through effort, commitment and actions. When it exists, communities and organizations benefit. We are early days in the NEW and continuing journey of these two groups, but we see the path laid and the sign posts set for the social license to operate.